

There is very little neutral ground in the Gospel of Mark. It's all about contrasts of extremes - miracles and killings. Again and again these strange and sometime scary characters appear - demons which inhabit humans; the rejection of Jesus by his own family; a gaggle of stalking pharisees which are portrayed as completely selfish people. On the other extreme there are the portrayals of amazingly good events - the healing faith of the woman who suffered from hemorrhages, the loyalty and friendship of the men who tear apart a roof in order to get their paralytic friend close to Jesus; a threatening storm stilled at the request of the Master. It's like we're on this pendulum that goes from one side to the other, skipping over the middle: good - bad; build up - tear down; life - death. It's exhausting, all of these extremes.

What Mark is doing here in this book is making it very clear that in our living there are actions that expand life and there are actions that decrease life. We can choose to welcome and expand the Kingdom of God or we can choose to spurn and decrease the Kingdom of God. And, Mark does this by repeatedly putting his readers at a fork in the road, presenting us with a choice. Choose life or choose death. Mark makes it clear that there's no fence sitting option available.

Which is exactly what happens in this morning's story about Herod, Herodias, Salome, and John the Baptist.

Does anyone else here feel after hearing this story that they've just witnessed an episode of the Jerry Springer Show?

We have Herod, first wife is a daughter of a king, visits his half-brother, Philip I. Falls in love with Philip's wife, Herodias (btw my computer keeps changing "Herodias" to "hernias"). Herodias is the granddaughter of Herod the Great, who is the father of Herod Antipas, making Herodias Herod's niece. Herod marries his niece.....

All the background research on Herodias indicate that she is not innocent here. She's a gold digger who ditched her first husband to marry the more powerful and richer uncle (after all now she is Queen). John the Baptist calls out Herodias' sin in a public way, Herodias get even.

Essentially, Herodias pimps her daughter, Salome, out by having her do a lounge act for her husband Herod and his drunken buddies (and we're not talking Holiday Inn lounge here). It must of been some act, because Herod gets himself all worked up and promises anything to the daughter, which turns out to be the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And now this pesky prophet is removed from Herodias' world. (I imagine it never occurred to Herodias that her actions would be recorded for all eternity in the most widely read book of all time. So, you see, you may be able to get rid of the prophet, but the words of the prophet hang around for eternity.)

Just as background, it's helpful to know that Mark has included this story as the antithetical example of the Old Testament story of Queen Esther. In the Esther story we have a drunken, foolish king, Xerxes of Persia. Xerxes had gotten rid of his previous wife and married Esther. Xerxes is tricked into killing all the Jews in his kingdom. Esther, who was secretly Jewish, asked Xerxes, who was drunk at a banquet, to spare her people.

At this point Xerxes and Herod are in similar situations. They have each been given a choice between choosing an action of life or an action of death, a fork in the road of life. Xerxes chooses life and saves the Jewish people. Herod chooses death and kills John.

While most of us don't experience choices of this magnitude, I think it's fair to say that in our day to day living we very often find ourselves at a fork in the road of life. Standing at these forks we can either make the choice to act in a way that generates life or we can act in a way that generates death. We can either build up the kingdom of God and the people of God or we can tear down the Kingdom of God and God's people. Sometimes these actions are big things such as standing up against discrimination or abuse in a public way; other times they may be as simple as how we treat the person checking out our groceries.

The reality of life is that there is evil in this world. While Herod's palace seems like a fairy tale place long ago in a land far, far away, in reality we don't have to wander very far in our lives too encounter evil today. Do we. I can guarantee you that within a four block radius of us there is some child being physically and emotionally abused. This passage forces us to look down a road in life in which injustice and brutal power prevails. This story grabs ahold of us and forces us to no longer keep our heads in the sand. It forces us to acknowledge there are people in the world who will go to any extreme to cut off the heads of the prophets in an attempt to maintain their power.

And, this story reminds us that there is a choice, a moment of choice, standing at the fork in the road. Put yourself in the role of Herod for a moment. Herod didn't want to kill John. Herod admired John. Herod valued John. Imagine yourself as Herod. Put yourself in Herod's head. *In his heart. In moment of choice you are forced between the innocent and the politically expedient.* In this moment, in this split second moment of choice, you are not alone. For you see, in these moments standing at the fork in life's road between life or death, there with you in that moment of choice also stands the Grace of God.

Grace is that power of God that carries us into life. Grace is not something we earn. Rather, it is that power of God that enables us to overcome our fears, our inhibitions, our selfishness. Grace is the power of God helping us to make bigger the Kingdom of God. Grace stands at the fork in the road waiting for Herod's acceptance or rejection of God's gift. Grace stands at every fork in the road in our lives, waiting, just waiting for our acceptance or rejection. Think of it as a free taxi.

Over this last couple of weeks I have seen some of you choose Grace. A few weeks ago God sent a stranger into our midst. Well, if truth be told, God drug this stranger into our midst via Elizabeth who ran out into the street and pulled him into church.

This stranger's name was Joel. Joel was staying at the homeless shelter. Now, let's be honest here and acknowledge that our society at large carries a lot of negative stereotypes about homeless people. Stereotypes that aren't always factual, but persist nevertheless. And, let's face it, our society would rather avoid the issue of homelessness and homeless people in general. So, when Joel walked into our church, we found ourselves standing at a proverbial fork in the road of life. We had a choice to make - do we accept Grace, move out of our comfort zone and expand life; or do we so no to Grace and decrease life. I'll let Joel tell you about his experience in his own words.